

Kissinger Closing Off Discussion on 'Confrontation'

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Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger yesterday tried to close off any further public inquiry into what he called a U.S.-Soviet "confrontation" in the Middle East last month that resulted in a controversial American global military alert.

This is no time "to recite . . . the elements of a situation of confrontation," Kissinger told a news conference, "when we are trying to calm the situation."

At the time, Oct. 25-26, Kissinger and Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger firmly denied that the two nuclear superpowers were in a "confrontation." "I think we were very far from a confrontation," Schlesinger said on Oct. 26, when the tension eased.

But later that same day, President Nixon told a news conference, "It was the most difficult crisis we have had since the Cuban confrontation of 1962."

Kissinger's comments yesterday were more in accord with the President's characterization of what occurred than they were with the original Kissinger and Schlesinger descriptions.

In addition to discrepancies in the accounts given by administration officials about how the U.S. worldwide alert was ordered during the night of Oct. 24-25, there are still several blanks in the sequence of events officially disclosed.

After the original American accusations were made, the official Soviet news agency, Tass charged the United States with "absurd" attempts "to intimidate the Soviet Union" by blaming it for provoking the alert.

The American alert, which caught the U.S. public and the rest of the world by surprise, aroused speculation that the Nixon administration may have deliberately over-reacted to a Soviet bluff to muffle domestic turmoil over the Watergate furor.

The previous weekend President Nixon had ousted Watergate Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox, which triggered the resignations of Attorney Gen-

eral Elliot L. Richardson and his deputy, William D. Ruckelshaus.

Many U.S. officials and members of Congress believed, then and now, that the Soviet Union may have been trying to put pressure on the

United States in the Middle East crisis to test its ability to react during the Watergate turmoil. Top administration officials insist that the danger of unilateral Soviet intervention in the Arab-Israeli war was real, not imaginary or magnified to counter the Watergate impact.

In retrospect, however, some officials believe the United States over-reacted by setting off a public worldwide alarm by a sensational military alert, rather than a more limited alerting of selected military forces.

Kissinger repeatedly declined yesterday to review publicly the events surrounding the U.S. alert, which included several messages from Soviet Communist Party chief Leonid I. Brezhnev. In the most critical message, delivered by Soviet Ambassador Anatoliy F. Dobrynin about 10 p.m. Oct. 24, Brezhnev reportedly called on the United States urgently to join the Soviet Union in sending military forces to halt and roll back Israeli troops that were then encircling Egypt's 3d Army on both banks of the Suez Canal.

If the United States declined to join in dispatching military forces, Brezhnev is reported to have said, in what was construed in the White House as the most ominous portion of the message, the Soviet Union "may be obliged" or "will be obliged" to consider "acting alone." One source said the message stated that the Soviet Union "will" intervene "to stop Israeli aggression." The actual language of the full Brezhnev message has not been enclosed.

Kissinger, in first commenting on the Soviet message at a news conference on Oct. 25, promised newsmen that within a week he would "put the then, with emotion, "there has to be a minimum of confi-

dence that the senior officials of the American government are not playing with the lives of the American people."

With that deadline long gone, Kissinger said yesterday that "quite frankly, I regretted" promising such a disclosure.

Kissinger said:

"As we are now moving toward peace negotiations, which we expect to conduct with the cooperation of the Soviet Union, I do not believe any useful purpose would be served if the United States recited confidential communications that had taken place and tried to recreate an episode of confrontation that hopefully has been transcended."

He said he had given "an account of these events" to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the Senate Armed Services Committee and the House Foreign Affairs Committee, plus "some account to the press . . ."

When Kissinger was asked if his original pledge to make the record public was designed to quell "American domestic turbulence" over the global alert, he replied with a grin, avoiding a direct reply, "It's a mistake to assume that everything that is said in a press conference is fully considered."

Asked to explain why his original characterization of what had happened and the President's differed so much,

with Kissinger disclaiming there was any U.S.-Soviet "confrontation" or a "missile crisis type of situation." Kissinger said, "I saw no purpose at that time to stress the aspects of confrontation."

Kissinger said President Nixon "described his judgment of the seriousness of the event had it occurred." By contrast, Kissinger said, he at the time was attempting "to influence a conciliatory attitude in the decisions that were to be taken." Just after his press conference Oct. 25, said Kissinger, he learned that the U.N. Security Council had agreed on a resolution that excluded Soviet and American troops from the peace-keeping force in the Middle East zone. With that, the risk of unilateral Soviet military in-

tervention subsided.

In a press conference here yesterday, Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban agreed that there was a "definite, authentic, real and imminent danger" of Soviet intervention at the time the United States ordered its global military alert. Eban said, "If the U.S. response had been any less clear . . . we would have faced the contingency with all its dangers for the fate of Europe and the international peace . . . It was disabbed by the American response."

In the sequence of events resulting in the U.S. alert, Kissinger went to Moscow on Oct. 20, and in two days of negotiations reached agreement on a U.S.-Soviet call for an immediate cease-fire. At that point the fortunes of war were shifting suddenly and the Soviet Union's client, Egypt, was coming under intense pressure from Israeli troops, which had crossed the Suez Canal and were raising a risk of encircling Egypt's 3d Army.

The U.S.-Soviet accord brought a Security Council resolution calling for an immediate cease-fire on Oct. 22. But Egypt and Israel each accused the other of breaching that cease-fire, and Israeli forces swept on to cut off the 3d Army.

It was at that point that Soviet alarm soared, perhaps, some U.S. officials suggest, with the suspicion that Kissinger, who went to Tel Aviv from Moscow, may have been secretly encouraging Israeli forces to advance. On Oct. 19, President Nixon publicly had asked Congress for an unusual \$2.2 billion in emergency arms aid for Israel.

U.S. intelligence experts, during this period, were close-

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by watching a heavy buildup of Soviet naval forces in the Mediterranean, plus possible movement of some 50,000 Soviet airborne forces which had been placed on alert days earlier.

As Israeli military forces pressed their attack on Egypt's 3d Army, U.S. intelligence reported that some additional Soviet army and transport units were placed on alert, and there was a sudden drop-off of Soviet AN-22 transport planes flying into Cairo. That aroused U.S. suspicion that the Soviet Union might be preparing to use its planes to bring paratroops into the battle on the Egyptian side.

The urgent warning from Brezhnev, which arrived in Washington at that juncture, produced official fears that Soviet intervention might be imminent. Defense Secretary Schlesinger said on Oct. 26 that "there were mixed reactions and different assessments of the probability," but enough to justify ordering a Condition 3 alert (on a scale of 1 to 5) as a "precaution."

The circumstances under which the alert was actually ordered, however, appear to have been unusual, and Kissinger declined to amplify on them yesterday. Schlesinger said he issued the first alert order from the White House at 11:30 p.m. Oct. 24, after discussions with Kissinger, Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and William Colby, director of the Central Intelligence Agency. They met as an incomplete National Security Council.

President Nixon was then in the living quarters of the White House, but Schlesinger said. "The President was in complete command at all times during the course of that evening."

Kissinger has said that "the President's senior advisers," all members of the National Security Council, "were unanimous in their recommendations as a result of a deliberation in which the President did not himself participate, and in which he joined only after they had formed their judgment, that the measures taken, that he in fact ordered, were in the essential national interest."

No authoritative official has explained why that procedure was employed, with the President separate from his advisers, except for Kissinger, who was the liaison between the President and his advisers in the White House situation room.

Schlesinger has said that there was "a whole series of decisions . . . between 11:30 p.m. and about 3:30 in the morning" and "as Dr. Kissinger indicated, 'he (President Nixon) approved the entire morning.'"

Kissinger is reported to have claimed he was stunned when he turned on his television set at 7 a.m. the morning of Oct. 25 and heard news of the American alert causing a sensation around the world.

Kissinger is portrayed as having expected the alert to have become known to the Russians through their intelligence apparatus, but not to the public for a day or more.

Other U.S. officials, however, say it was inconceivable that a global alert could have remained secret. They say everyone dealing with it must have known the news would leak out immediately when U.S. military forces and reservists throughout the world received such orders.